

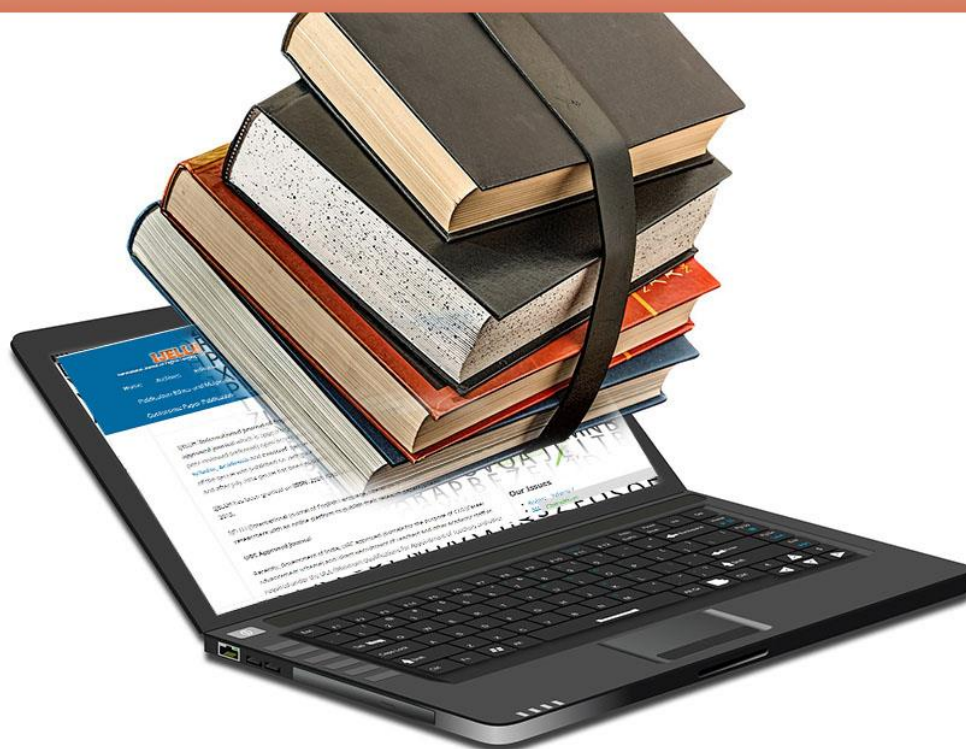
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Evolving masculinity: A study of changing faces of masculinity in J.M. Coetzee's
'The Childhood of Jesus'

Abstract

In 'The Childhood of Jesus', J.M. Coetzee presents before us a continuation and a revaluation of masculinity by setting his story in a new country. Simon and David reaches the new country after travelling through the oceans. They are washed clean off all their memories. Their names are given at a random camp in a desert, their ages are also assigned likewise. This new identity but, does not alter the already conditioned hegemonic masculinity of Simon. The male characters, especially the main protagonist, Simon is seen as a shadow of the old hegemonic masculinity and is shown juxtaposed with the other male characters like Álvaro and Eugenio, who exhibit an emerging masculinity where the sexes exist on the passionless grounds of sheer goodwill. Coetzee champions a more equitable and harmonious form of masculinity and stresses on the impact of society and culture in the shaping of masculinity. Through the eyes of an outsider, Simon who is launched into a new country with different gender equation and hierarchy, Coetzee achieves in portraying how masculinity is socially and culturally constructed. We find a new society where the patriarchy dividend is low. The plot unravels the conflict Simon undergoes with the new masculinity of the new

country and how he strives to forgo his old memories or his old conditioned ways of manhood.

Key words: hegemonic, masculinity, harmonious, gender equation, hierarchy

Introduction

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was propounded by R. W. Connell's in her gender order theory. In her theory she has introduced many masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is classified as a social organization by which men control and propagate the mores of manhood in a given geography. In the beginning, the hegemonic masculinity originated with the act of breadwinning coerced by cultural and social idealism. This idealistic image of the real man comprised of him being rich and powerful economically. In course of time this became entangled with his heterosexuality and male prowess. Terry Kupers has identified the two legs of hegemonic masculinity: "domination of women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance." Other major traits of the real man includes heterosexuality, homophobia, championing anti-feminine characteristics, reluctance towards admitting weakness, etc. (Kupers, 713–724). All these traits influences the formation of the masculinity in the younger males in a society.

Simon and David are total strangers to each other who reaches a new country after crossing the oceans. They are washed clean off all their memories. The boy loses touch with his mother when he boards the ship and Simon takes his responsibility. Simon makes a promise to David that he will find his mother. They are given a new name and a new age in the new land. Simon who is more than 45 years is gauged to be 45 and the boy, David is given an age of five in the camp at a desert in Belstar. With their new identity they move to a Centro de Reubicación in Novilla aided by their broken knowledge of the new language, Spanish.

They settle down in Novilla where the demand for food, work and accommodation is met with relative ease. Simon finds the food habits of the new land which comprises mainly of bread and fruits inadequate. He experiences the same inadequacy in the lives of the people in general. There is no passion in relationships, no drinking, no fight and everybody works under the spell of goodwill. In short, he finds the whole episode to be disappointing. He finds women like Ana and Elena speaking of goodwill and progress as opposed to love and seduction. He finds his work as a stevedore and the fellow men also senseless and absurd. He finds the mother of David in a random woman, Inés with whom he does not have any previous acquaintance when he visits La Residencia.

This thesis aims to study the traits of hegemonic masculinity in Simon as well the harmonious masculinity. This study proposes to stress that a more harmonious form of masculinity can evolve if the mores laid down by the society and culture are cultivated accordingly.

1. Traits of hegemonic masculinity vs. harmonious masculinity

1.1 Heterosexuality

Simon and David are helped by Ana from Centro de Reubicación, Novilla - the first woman character introduced in the novel. She assists Simon and David in finding an abode and gives him directions for finding work. Simon finds work as a stevedore in the harbour. Later she invites them for a picnic in the park along with the other residents of the centre.

At the park, Simon mistakenly senses her gestures to be an open invitation for sex. When Simon is aroused by Ana, she merely rejects him saying that his shallow need for satiating his ordinary physical desire is the root cause of his attraction towards her. Simon, who still is unconsciously conditioned by the social hierarchy mistakes her to be a nun and

her lack of interest in him due to that. After she clears his misunderstanding, she further explicates the male urge for heterosexuality thus:

“And because you find me beautiful, your appetite, your impulse, is to embrace me. Do I read the signs correctly, the signs you give me? Whereas if you did not find me beautiful you would feel no such impulse.” (The Childhood of Jesus, 38)

Simon counters her notion by calling his urge as a tribute or an offering to honour her beauty and not as an act to insult the other. He says that there is nothing wrong in having an appetite and desires as they drive life. She calmly negates his opinion again by saying:

“And as a tribute to me – an offering, not an insult – you want to grip me tight and push part of your body into me. As a tribute, you claim. I am baffled. To me the whole business seems absurd – absurd for you to want to perform, and absurd for me to permit.” (The Childhood of Jesus, 40)

She further shares her concern over the fact that the sexual appetite changes a man into a dominating creature. Through their exchange the reader along with Simon is launched into the new ways of the new land where women has the power of choice. Simon's reveals his helpless bafflement to Ana thus:

“Do you know what surprises me most about this country?’ ... ‘That it is so bloodless. Everyone I meet is so decent, so kindly, so well-intentioned. No one swears or gets angry. No one gets drunk. No one even raises his voice. You live on a diet of bread and water and bean paste and you claim to be filled. How can that be, humanly speaking? Are you lying, even to yourselves?’” (The Childhood of Jesus, 37)

Simon's masculinity is conditioned by the social and cultural influences of his old existence. Heterosexuality becomes a virtual reality he seems to be grappling with in the new

land. He is always in the game of seducing women. The next woman character who is introduced is Elena, the single mother of Fidel. Although he dislikes her bony appearance he still tries to seduce her. For Simon, women and men exist to seduce each other. Elena also explains on the theme of goodwill in the new land. She speaks of men and women as not different from each other. Her reluctance or moreover the lack of physical desire on the basis of goodwill is repudiated by Simon who asks how goodwill can satisfy the needs born out of desire.

Simon is clearly struggling with his old and conditioned ways of masculinity with the women of the new country. He understands the thrust behind Elena's as well as the notion of others on physical desires and heterosexuality. His mind is invaded by an array of questions which reflects his dilemma in adorning the social and cultural trend of the new land. He muses thus on how he will also adapt to the new gender conditioning as Ana and Elena has done and emerge as a "new, perfected man" (65)

"Is he hoping to seduce her, because in memories that are not entirely lost to him seducing one another is something that men and women do? Is he insisting on the primacy of the personal (desire, love) over the universal (goodwill, benevolence)? And why is he continually asking himself questions instead of just living, like everyone else? Is it all part of a far too tardy transition from the old and comfortable (the personal) to the new and unsettling (the universal)?" (The Childhood of Jesus, 65)

Even the act of lovemaking is seen in a different light by Simon and Elena. Simon sees it as 'a patient and prolonged act of resuscitation' (69) as if he is doing a favour to Elena whose body is according to him dead of all practical purpose. A sense of utilitarianism is conveyed here in the outlook of Simon towards the 'other' sex. Elena's lack of interest is due

to the fact that she does not see sex as an advancement of relationship. A similar contention from Simon is revealed when he winds up the conversation with Ana claiming it as non-profitable.

Ana's claim that it is beauty that triggers attraction in a man which he wishes to consummate with a physical intercourse is proved right even in the case of Elena. Elena does not strike to be a soul-stirring beauty to Simon. Yet he continues seeing her just to cherish the feeling of holding a woman in his arms. It is also an evidence that for a man who is in his fifties or more it is difficult to forget the old-nurtured ways. Hegemonic masculinity is a condition he is unable to unlearn.

Simon's needs does not settle down with Elena. Her passionless lovemaking urges him to look for comfort elsewhere. When he confides this to Elena she pinpoints the illusion in which Simon is living in. She asserts that Simon's ways of thinking is what is making him dissatisfied; not only with lovemaking but life in general. It is this illusion that everybody in the new land is rid of. Simon still defends for his needs by stressing on the lack of weight and substance in everything, let it be music or food or the foreign language. In Simon, we hear a resonance of alienation owing to diaspora. He ends up registering at Salon Confort where he expects to find beautiful women who will succumb to his sexual needs.

When Inés is introduced in the novel, we find Simon making a frantic effort in convincing her to be the mother of David in the first meeting itself. Later when Elena questions him about his quick and precarious decision based on his instinct, he is at a loss for a reason. He does not feel any attraction towards her. Elena stresses on the fact that something from his past might have urged him to see the 'mother' of David in the thirty-year old virgin. While he is sexually attracted to Ana who is also a virgin, he feels the opposite

towards Inés. There seems to be an inner psychosocial conditioning in play in Simon's decision of choosing Inés as David's mother.

When the sexual needs of other men of the new country like that of Alvaro and Eugenio are considered, we find them utterly disinterested in women. They are already conditioned by the norms of the new society Alvaro is the foreman where Simon works as a stevedore. Simon feels like a misfit when he looks at the life of other men around him. He looks at Alvaro and finds him spending his time at work and later at football. He is surprised to see them devoid of any yearning for sexual pleasure. Even the younger men like Eugenio at the workplace are not interested in women. Instead he spends his time productively at the Institute where he learns philosophy. Due to this brotherhood there is no strife for dominance among men.

Coetzee introduces Senor Daga, a violator of all the values of harmonious masculinity in the new country. He comes to work as a stevedore and finding the pay and the hard work as not worth the effort he steals from the paymaster through violence. In the fight which ensues, Daga wounds Alvaro with a knife, steals the money and the bicycle and pedals away in leisure while the other men watches helplessly. Daga exemplifies toxic masculinity in which he causes serious harm to the society. He lives in pleasure and David is awed by his lifestyle of great pomp.

By using a child character, David, Coetzee is trying to show the various influences which plays a part in shaping the mores and norms of the boy's masculinity. David who has not yet been sent to a school, is imbibing the ideas of manhood from the society of people around him. He is seen to be changed after he moves from the guidance of Simon to the possessive control of Inés. He is set with good examples of Alvaro and Fidel in the beginning

but when he moves into the circle of Inés, he comes in contact with the nonchalant and expensive lifestyle of her brothers.

1.2 Gender roles and hierarchy

Masculinity in its derivative form is fuelled by the gender roles existing within a society. Simon is bent upon finding the mother of David. In a stroke of instinct he sees the mother in a random stranger called Inés. Where Simon is seen as an effective parent to David who provides and cares for him, Simon himself does not believe in the role. He believes instead in the power of a mother in raising a child, which is the projection of the hierarchy of the female role. When Elena projects the question of how Inés, a virgin could be a mother and how she can understand motherhood without giving birth, she is projecting the idea of a biological mother.

Simon reiterates that he cannot be everything to David. He cannot be his mother. Inés but takes the role of a possessive mother. She does not let Simon play the part of a father or a guardian. Inés proves to be a strange mother to everybody around her. Her choice of girlish clothes for David makes Simon rethink about his decision to hand over David to Inés. Simon finds the ways of Inés upbringing to be a threat to the developing manhood of the boy.

Alvaro also questions David's decision and he declines the idea of the "law of nature" held by Simon. He suggests to Simon thus,

"You love him. He loves you. That isn't artificial. It's the law that is artificial. He should be with you. He needs you." (The Childhood of Jesus, 102)

A question on gender roles is put forth by Coetzee through Alvaro. Simon's staunch belief that only a woman could be a mother is yet another instance of how the biological as well as sociological conditioning of roles is still predominant in his outlook. Every role is

gender-specific to Simon. Elena echoes another biased viewpoint that unless a woman carries and conceives from a womb, a woman cannot become a real mother.

Elena further substantiates over the inappropriateness of Simon's choice of Inés. Inés plays sports with men and she keeps dogs. She does not let David socialize with other children like Fidel. For Elena, Inés is the opposite of everything feminine. The social construction of gender as reflected in Elena is in direct conflict with that of Inés whose ways are akin to that of an assertive female.

Judith Butler has commented thus on the assigning of various roles based on gender:

“The notion that gender is constructed, suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.” (Butler 2002, 12)

Simon is fixated on the idea of the women as mothers and her role of motherhood which can never be challenged by fatherhood. Concerned about David getting affected by his strange family comprising of Inés, accidental virgin mother and Simon, who is not his biological father, he consoles David thus:

“...fathers aren't very important, compared with mothers. A mother brings you out of her body into the world. She gives you milk, as I mentioned. She holds you in her arms and protects you. Whereas a father can sometimes be a bit of a wanderer, like Don Quixote, not always there when you need him. He helps to

make you, right at the beginning, but then he moves on.” (The Childhood of Jesus, 230)

Simon’s contention of motherhood and fatherhood again highlights his social conditioning which supports his views on the female role and male role around him.

1.3 Man as the provider of the family

He tries to nourish the boy with fruits as the boy hate bread, which is available in plenty in the new land. He finds it odd that there is no meat to eat there except for rats which raises his concern for the nourishment of the boy further. Simon unconsciously contributes to David’s conditioning of the male role. The boy is taken for a football match which is essentially a man’s game where Simon tries to make him understand about the game’s rules.

He requests Inés to let David play with Fidel as Simon knows the importance of peer interaction and gender socialization in shaping of the boy’s masculinity. Since the boy is not send to a school, Simon chooses Don Quixote from an array of books on various topics such as carpentry, recipes, crocheting and son on to teach him to read. He chooses the story of a knight as is fitting for the boy’s taming into masculinity.

Simon always tries to lead David in the right direction. When David is awed by Senor Daga Simon tries to guide him by stating his “best interests” (254) which is to be a good seed by fighting evil, protecting the poor from the rich and rescuing maidens like Don Quixote.

When Inés challenges Simon by denying him any access to the boy Simon is heartbroken. Simon gives up his apartment so that the boy will have a mother. He also provides them with money as a contribution towards their wellbeing. All these are questioned by Elena and Alvaro as they both believe that nobody could look after David like Simon did. Later Inés also calls for Simon’s help to fix their bathroom. Simon acts like a knight in

shining armour whenever the need arises. He along with David and Inés escapes from Novilla so that David could be kept away from the reformatory school in Punta Arenas.

1.4 Reluctance towards accepting weakness

Simon finds work as a stevedore in the harbour in Novilla. Alvaro, the foreman finds him a little aged for the role. Stevedoring required Simon to haul heavy sacks of wheat, walk a narrow gangplank, and climb a long ladder to unload the sacks on the deck above. While Simon is performing the tedious task, all he could think was not to embarrass himself in front of other men and especially David. He always wanted to be a role model to David. He tells Alvaro that he feels ageless even though he looks old. He suggests the introduction of cranes for the job instead of working like “beasts of burden.” Simon seems to be trying to hide his own weakness by making such remarks.

When he get dizzy spells during his work he visits the clinic at the harbour. He blames his weakness on the lack of good nutritious food in the new country. The doctor suggests that there is nothing wrong with him medically. Simon in order to shield his weakness, blames everything in the new land as disappointing.

1.5 Intermale dominance

Simon finds the other men of the new land as strange due to the different code of masculinity. There is only goodwill amongst them. Often the tendency to dominate others raises its head in Simon. He suggests to Alvaro that they should get a crane rather than wasting their energy lifting sacks. He feels that he should rescue them from the wrong path where they are wasting their intelligence on manual labour. After seeing the storehouse of wheat invaded by rats, Simon tirades against the spoilage made by the rats and speaks for the introduction of new technology to avoid rat infestation. Simon's contentions are not welcomed wholeheartedly by the men of the new land as his views are opposite to their

conditioned way of life. Eugenio accuses Simon's views of mechanizing everything as a step to harbouring idleness.

Senor Daga is another male character who is at the other end of the pendulum. He exhibits traits of toxic masculinity by exerting violence and exhibiting virility. When Simon finds Inés to be attracted to Daga, he feels threatened of losing his control over David and Inés. Like a competitor striving for the hand of Inés he proposes to Inés that if she wishes to produce siblings for David, she should consider him instead of Daga. Daga exemplifies the tendency of every man to be recognized. Inés like David is attracted to the dominant masculinity in Daga. Whereas Simon is the subdued male who respects women, Daga provides a contrast to him. He makes his advances for women and power without much delay. Once he takes David with him while they were standing in a queue at an office, without informing Inés. The petrified Inés is helped by Simon in tracking David who was found watching television in Daga's apartment. We find in the character of Daga, a rash instinct which never considers the good of others or the society in general.

Conclusion

In Simon, we find a bridging of the old and the new. His dilemma is the first step towards an emerging masculinity. He is also aware of the fact that like the other men of the new country, he will also have to adapt to the new masculinity. Through Simon, Coetzee has sieved a new manhood where he is merging the good in the old kind of hegemonic masculinity with the new masculinity. In the new country men and women co-exist without much power difference. There seems to be an iteration of the concept that masculinity is not a static tendency 'but are configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold, and change through time.' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 852)

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